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ABSTRACT

The SHAPE program, an innovative program to help teachers collaborate and support each other, was instituted at an inner-city high school in Toledo (Ohio). This study attempted to determine whether teachers in SHAPE were experiencing an improvement in their perceptions of control over educational outcomes as a result of their SHAPE participation. Essentials of the SHAPE program were keeping groups of students and teachers together to form a community (pod), allowing all teachers a common planning period, and providing an extensive inservice program. Two pods of four teachers each participated in this case study. They were observed during their planning periods and professional development workshops. Teachers were also interviewed twice. One effect of SHAPE was a perceived increase in teacher autonomy. Teachers also felt that they had greater ability to make changes in the curriculum and greater opportunities for reflection. The greater sense of control over student learning was reflected in classroom practice. (Contains 13 references.) (SLD)

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Teacher Collaboration and Perceptions of Control

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Teachers in urban high schools are faced with problems such as: many students who are several grade levels below the norm, low levels of student motivation, little parent involvement in the schools, financial problems, negative behaviors of students, and little student respect for teachers (Corcoran, Walker, & White, 1988). These conditions can complicate already difficult teaching tasks and create a great deal of uncertainty in many teachers. When teachers are confronted with these circumstances, they may become discouraged and feel they are totally powerless with respect to control over the educational outcomes of their students. Losing the capacity to control the terms of work causes one to disassociate oneself from the products of the work (Rosenholtz, 1989).

Rosenholtz (1989) indicates that teachers who attribute instructional outcomes to non controllable factors avoid new challenges. This is especially pertinent for teachers in urban, low socioeconomic settings. On the other hand, teachers who attribute instructional outcomes to controllable factors "confront new challenges...with greater optimism and promise"(p. 143).

One innovative program in an inner-city school is the SHAPE program at Scott High School in Toledo, OH. This study attempted to determine whether teachers in SHAPE were experiencing an improvement in their perceptions of control

over educational outcomes as a result of their participation in SHAPE. The study also investigated whether there were changes in teaching practice as a result of these perceptions.

Literature Review

The field of teaching is one that entails unplanned and complex circumstances. There are many challenges involved with teaching in inner-city schools today. The challenge for teachers in education today, and especially those in urban schools, is well documented. In many instances there are conflicts between the culture of the school and that of the students in areas such as: "...learning styles, relational styles, communication styles, and perceptions of involvement" (Gilbert & Gay, 1985, p. 171). Urban educators also face problems in areas such as finances, negative perceptions by the public, inadequate physical facilities, political pressures, and dissatisfaction among colleagues (Passow, 1982). Teachers in urban schools are often dealing with students who lack a sense of belonging, see no connection between school and the outside world, and are unmotivated. Attendance is frequently very poor and students are often functioning far below grade expectations (Maeroff, 1988).

These uncertainties that urban teachers face may result in a potentially threatening situation to one's self-esteem. There is a need to maintain control. Attempts are made to

avoid situations (limit risk taking) if there is doubt concerning one's ability to maintain control (Rosenholtz, 1989).

This disassociation manifests itself in the manner in which teachers perform in the classroom. When teachers feel uncertain, the use of routine instructional techniques protects them from unexpected situations in which they may not be able to maintain control (Rosenholtz, 1989). This uncertainty causes many of them to: "lower their professional aspirations; become less involved with students; absent themselves more frequently and defect more often from the workforce"(Rosenholtz, 1989, p 143). Teachers with a low sense of efficacy do not think that they are able to influence student learning. They reduce efforts or give up completely in difficult situations. Teaching effectiveness is reduced because of their perceived inadequacies (Ashton & Webb, 1986).

One question for this research was whether involvement in the SHAPE program allowed the teachers to perceive of themselves as more in control of the educational outcomes of their students. When people are given more autonomy and discretion, they become the causal agents (Rosenholtz, 1989). People are autonomous when they are able to develop and pursue alternative courses of action. Two important aspects of control in the workplace are control over the use of one's time and physical movement and freedom from hierarchical authority (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). As social organizational

arrangements help teachers believe in their teaching practices and encourage them to pursue alternative and successful methods, they should experience themselves as causal agents.

Another question considered in this research was whether any changes in teaching practice have occurred as a result of SHAPE. Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy believe they do have a positive influence on student learning. They look for challenges, are motivated, and experience pride in their accomplishments (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Also, teachers who attribute instructional outcomes to controllable factors "confront new challenges...with greater optimism and promise"(Rosenholtz,p. 143).

Project SHAPE

Three elements were considered essential aspects of the SHAPE program (Kretovics, J., Farber,K., & Armaline, W., 1991). The first was to keep groups of students and teachers together to create a community (pod). The second was allowing all the teachers a second planning (common work) period. The third was an extensive inservice program. The abstract for the SHAPE program states: "The success of the Project depends, to a great extent, on the proper use of this second planning period"(p. 6).

When teachers volunteer for the SHAPE program, they are required to make a three year commitment. The initial year,

they are provided regular teaching assignments except for a common planning period. During this time, they plan the program for the next year and are involved in professional development activities. The next two years, they teach one group of students as those students progress through the ninth and tenth grades. Incoming students also volunteer to be involved in the program. Groups of up to 100 students are split into four classes. Each group of students remains together for their four basic classes each day. Four teachers (math, science, English, and social studies) teach these four classes of students.

Teachers are given more autonomy to develop curriculum, and to initiate instructional and classroom management strategies. Other significant aspects of the program are an extensive professional development program, the availability of grant money, and an emphasis on parental contact.

There were two teams (pods) of four teachers involved in this study. There were three different types of collaborative sessions. One was the full group of eight (two or three days each week). Another was meetings by each pod of four teachers (once or twice each week). The third was meetings between teachers in the same discipline (both English teachers, etc.) which occurred one day each week.

Research Methods

The method employed for this research was a case study. Data was gathered from participant observation records, interviews, and classroom observations. The participants were eight teachers (two English, two mathematics, two science, and two social studies) involved in the freshman SHAPE program at Scott High School in Toledo, Ohio. Two of the teachers had over twenty years experience, the other six had taught four years or less. Six of the teachers are female and two are male. One teacher is African-American and the other seven are Caucasian.

The participant observer role satisfied two of the requirements that Lancy (1993) mentions as extremely valuable. The first related to whether the researcher has a legitimate role within the research context. This researcher had an assigned role, in fact one aspect of the assignment was to take notes during the common planning period. Thus, there was a legitimate reason for being involved with the group. In addition, this role provided valuable services to the teachers. The researcher produced and distributed weekly copies of the meeting notes. In addition, the researcher served as a liaison between the teachers and the University professors. Also, the researcher compiled statistical data concerning the program. Occasionally, the teachers would make requests of the researcher. For example, once he was asked to

visit one of their classes with which they were having problems to make suggestions.

The second of Lancy's requirements was that the researcher would gradually become accepted as a member of the group. When this researcher first started attending sessions, he was perceived by the teachers as an outsider. However, over a period of time, he came to be accepted as a member of the group. An affirmation of this came during one of the interviews, when a teacher mentioned that she had been worried that many people would be visiting her classroom to analyze her teaching. She then stated: "I don't mind you visiting, because I know you."

Therefore, since the teachers accepted both the legitimacy of the researcher's role and his membership in the group, there did not seem to be any reluctance to be totally candid in front of him. During the planning sessions, careful notes were made of all the proceedings.

During the school year, these teachers were observed during approximately 75% of their common planning periods or a total of 125 sessions between September and June. Approximately two thirds of the meetings were with the entire group of eight teachers. The other meetings were with one or the other of the pods of four (roughly equal attendance with each pod). Another source of information was five evening professional development sessions. These were administered by University personnel and attendance for the teachers was

voluntary during this school year. During these sessions, notations were made of all the significant proceedings.

The interviews were structured in accordance with the techniques proposed by Spradley (1979). He indicated that rapport should involve a sense of trust, but not deep friendship or profound intimacy. Thus while a sense of basic trust developed between the researcher and participants, no attempts were made to develop strong friendships with members of the group. According to Spradley, one should ask a major "grand tour" question and then use the participants' responses to generate new questions. At a later stage, he suggested that structured questions should be used to probe more deeply.

The teachers were interviewed twice. Both interviews lasted approximately one hour. These took place in May except for one teacher who was interviewed in February (for a pilot study). The first interview began with the question: "How has your teaching changed as a result of your involvement in SHAPE?" The responses to this question were used to formulate further questions. Structured questions later in the interview related to the teachers' statements or attitudes during the planning sessions. The second interview occurred after the classroom observations. This revolved around how involvement in SHAPE had effected specific practices which were observed during classroom visits. All of the interviews were taped. The tapes were transcribed and condensed. Condensed versions were provided to the teachers and their input was solicited (Lancy, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Participants were observed teaching two different classes of students. Care was taken to schedule these observations during regular class sessions (not during exams, movies, or other unusual situations). Visits to the one teacher's classroom took place during February (as part of a pilot study). The other classroom visits occurred during the month of May (all except one during the second week). An attempt was made to record all significant activities which occurred during the class period with respect to both the teacher and students.

While these notes were transcribed and reviewed, they were not given the same weight as the other data. The rationale behind this action was that this constituted too small a sample to project overall teaching trends. Rather this information was used primarily for two other purposes. The first was to provide an information base for questions used during the second interview. The second was to corroborate information regarding classroom procedures provided during the planning sessions and/or interviews.

The specific framework used to analyze the data paralleled that proposed by Goetz & LeCompte (1984). They indicate that the first step in data analysis is to establish "units of analysis" to both guide the collection of data and to help reduce the raw data to manageable divisions. All the data collected during participant observation and the teacher interviews were categorized. Next, "Data are massed and scanned through systematic content analysis" (p. 170).

Triangulation is an important procedure in qualitative research (Lancy, 1993; Miles & Huberman 1984; Yin 1984). This is simply the method of using data from different sources to support conclusions. Thus in developing conclusions, the information gathered from classroom observations and interviews was used to support the participant-observer data.

Results

One effect of SHAPE is a perceived increase in teacher autonomy. A teacher indicated that they were able to circumvent bureaucratic procedures and exert more authority. "In this situation, we have control over the curriculum. We have control of the policies as long as we keep within the school rules....the teachers in SHAPE have a change process available so that adjustments can be made if techniques and structures are not appropriate. On the other hand, traditional settings breed complacency since teachers don't feel that they have any chance to make significant changes,...as a group we're able to get more autonomy from the system."

One advantage mentioned by all SHAPE teachers was the ability to make changes in such areas as curriculum, schedules, and grades. Another change that impressed all teachers was the power to determine disciplinary policy. "We can refer students to the office and they don't receive demerits. Most teachers don't do that, they just play the

game. There's a board policy and they let the board policy run itself.".

The SHAPE teachers also indicated receiving much encouragement from the examples of others. One teacher indicated that the fact that the other teachers were still trying helped one avoid becoming despondent. The collaboration in SHAPE also allowed a great amount of support among the teachers.

Another change resulting from SHAPE was an increase in the opportunities for reflection. One teacher indicated that she felt uncertain less often because there were always three other teachers off whom to bounce ideas. This reflection also improved teachers' attitudes concerning their job. "One can feel really bad when things are going bad, but if you have other teachers to talk to, and compare with, and get new ideas from you feel that you have better control over the situation."

As a result of these factors, the teachers felt a greater sense of control over the educational outcomes of the students. One teacher indicated that previously she felt that she had to fit into the existing structure. She now feels that she is an expert on her own students and subject area. "Just let me and my group make my decisions. I want to be able to control my classroom." Another indicated that she had never considered teacher empowerment prior to SHAPE. She had just accepted the hierarchy but now felt that teachers can do it better. The teachers now feel more responsible for a

student's successes or failures. The teachers also feel a greater accountability for student behavior: "...the people in the office call us when a kid gets in trouble." One teacher indicated that this was a change from the past when social, economic, and cultural factors had been used as excuses for not being in control.

There were numerous examples of how this perception of control was reflected in classroom practice. Several teachers indicated that they were now using a mastery approach to education. A science teacher indicated that there was no longer pressure to move through a book at a certain rate. Therefore, students were being taught concepts and enough time was spent to insure that they were learned. Cross-curricular approaches were employed in many instances. Teachers cooperated in such areas as teaching study skills, note taking, coordinating schedules, and agreeing to change assessment practices (not having final exams represent 20% of the semester grade and including an effort component in the grade).

There were also significant classroom changes as a result of improvements in communication. Teachers shared with one another successful strategies for working with certain students, effective techniques, and many other suggestions. This permitted the others to replicate their success.

DISCUSSION

This research found that the SHAPE program did provide conditions which allowed the teachers to perceive that they had more control over the educational outcomes of their students. This in turn resulted in changes in classroom practices.

One reason for this perception of control was related to increases in teacher autonomy (Gecas & Scwalbe,1983). The teachers felt that they had opportunities to circumvent bureaucratic procedures and exert more authority. They also perceived that they had more opportunities to make changes in areas such as curriculum, schedules and assessment practices. Thus, while before they had believed that they had little control over many factors related to the education of their students they now concluded that they had a considerable amount of authorityin these matters. In other words, they did begin to perceive of themselves as causal agents (Rosenholtz, 1989).

The teachers gained encouragement from the examples of others. Their was an increase in the opportunity for reflection since other teachers were always available as consultants. Thus, they did begin to attribute instructional outcomes to controllable factors leading to greater optimism toward teaching (Rosenholtz, 1989). They also perceived that they were capable of influencing student learning and thus were looking for more challenges and experiencing a greater

amount of pride in their accomplishments (Ashton & Webb, 1986).

These changes in perception of control by the teachers seemed to to be related to unique aspects of the SHAPE program. The most significant of these was the teacher collaborative units which were established. Many of these attitudinal changes occurred because of the teachers' improved confidence as a result of working as a group. Other significant innovations were allowing teachers more freedom over curricular, disciplinary, and assessment practices. Other aspects of the program such as professional development and the provision of additional resources, while valuable, did not seem to influence the perceptions of teacher control significantly.

Obviously, this was only one program at one urban high school. However, in this instance when teachers worked together collaboratively they were able to perceive that they had greater control of their work environment. This produced changes in the outcomes of their teaching which in turn produced greater perceptions of control and thus created a snowball effect. It is felt that similar results would generalize to other urban schools.

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